

Diamond in the Rough

by Church -Caboose- Shepard

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Summary: The end of the Reaper war has come and gone. The galaxy is repairing, and its people grieve. However, for Shepard's sole surviving heir, Benese, mysteries from the past, will soon become clear. As she is thrust into yet another ominous presence that may yet again threaten the galaxy. (Start of a) Sequel to The Cycle.

1. Prologue

****AN: ****Sorry folks, got to start off with a large little memo to you and myself. This is a story that I've had in my head for a while, and I really want to get it written down. This will be a sequel to my main story and crossover, The Cycle. However, it will hold only minor spoilers. So far, there will only be this prologue, that will set down the main characters (That is until the before mentioned story is finished. I have vast plans for the universe made in The Cycle, and I would like very much to share them with you. The only thing that will be spoiled for the previous story (For now) is Shepard's final love interest.

The love interest was chosen by you, the readers, through a poll I had posted months ago. So that's set and done. Everything else, including the ending and if Shepard lives, are up in the air. And will more than likely be chosen by you, so go and follow The Cycle already! If you want a chance to completely change this universe.

On another special side note, I want to point out a grammar mistake most of you will notice. Every species has their species name capitalized (i.e. Asari, Human etc). The reason for this is because the Halo races are capitalized, and it bugs me to only have half of them with a capital letter. For a more detailed explanation, go read The Cycle. (Think I have enough requests to go read that story yet?)

* * *

><p>Prologue

****A Diamond in the Rough****

****Thessia****

On the Asari home world, one particular thing of beauty stood out over all the rest. One would be hard pressed to discover exactly what that would be. Thessia was overrun with beautiful sites. Most would guess the population, filled with Asari seen as stunning by every species imaginable, would be the top tourist draw. Others would be closer to the truth, proclaiming the natural landscape their sole desire to see. And if you asked a soldier, they would point you to the Reaper war memorial, a simple light placed into the country side of what used to be a sprawling city. Their reasoning was one of remembrance, remembering that the light shown out into the night sky, powerful enough to be seen from space, would shine forever. That the light would be there to always remind the galaxy of the billions who's light was extinguished forever.

However, as the young Asari Benese Shepard sat on a school bench, she didn't think of any of this. She never thought about war memorials, or nature, least of all about beautiful women, she was far too young to have such thoughts in her mind. Instead, Benese thought only about how alluring the sun set was.

She watched them, every chance she had. Her school seemed to have the best place to just sit and watch them, from the front balcony of the third floor. At that exact spot, Benese was able to see everything she dreamed about. It wasn't too high to have the view blocked by skycar traffic, but wasn't too low so as to have her eye sight obstructed by a tree line. Everything came together just right, so as to view the most spectacular sunset. According to her, Thessia must have the best sunsets in the galaxy. For it was only on Thessia, that the natural eezo could fly into the air, creating an amazing blue tint to the star as it passed below the horizon.

That moment of when the sun hit just the right angle in its descent, right as it touched the background of the horizon, she would always move to the edge of her seat, grinning wildly for the moment it would fade out of sight and mind. It made her gleeful every time.

However, on this feigning evening, Benese was not alone. Disgruntled by the visitor, she tried to ignore them completely, not willing to let anything run that perfect moment when the sun morphed into the tip of the horizon. Unfortunately, this visitor intended to stay.

"Hello, Benese. I thought you might still be here. May I sit with you?" Liara asked. Without waiting to be answered, she sat down on the bench next to her daughter, careful not to disturb her with any kind of contact. She folded her hands in her own lap, resisting every urge she had to just hug and coddle the girl next to her.

Never taking her eyes away from the horizon, Benese responded, "Of course, mother. It's not like I had a choice." She spoke in a sarcastic tone, careful not too make it harsh enough to receive

punishment.

"Oh Benese," Liara sighed, "You always have a choice my love."

She looked towards her mother, tears welling up in her eyes. "Then I don't want uncle Joker to die."

"Sweetheart," grumbled Liara, who pulled the child into her arms, embracing her in a hug. "They say our life spans are some kind of blessing. But you have to understand, 40 years for you is a long time for Joker. He's been through so much, and has been sick for so very long."

Unable to contain herself, Benese buried her head into Liara's chest, water rolling down her bright blue cheeks between sobs.

"But it isn't fair!"

"I know Benese, life for a child is never fair."

Benese never was able to watch the sunset that day.

* * *

><p>Earth

A few days later

Earth was something vastly different than Thessia. Unlike the latter, her landscape hadn't fully returned from the war, the cities seemed even less so. Even decades after peace, Earth still seemed to lag behind the Asari by a few years. Yet, for all Thessia's seemingly better qualities, Liara still loved the planet just as equally. Benese would often question her mother's motives on this subject, and was always meant with the same response. "That planet brought me everything I love, including you."

In response, Benese always asked, "But wasn't I born on Thessia? What did Earth ever have to do with me?" This normally caused her mother to retreat into solitude, always unable to answer.

However, this was Benese's first time visiting Earth, and she was bound and determined to dig up some kind of answers. For a child, she was heavily inquisitive, always rushing to clues searching for the next answer to some unsolved mystery.

Upon first landing on the planet, Benese was forced to admit there was a certain charm that came with Humanity. While her home was adorned in splendid colors, and plenty of blue, Earth sparkled with something different. Her people were unique, all of them their own special individual. Even the dock workers all dripped with the possibility of a story that evolved into its own splendid tale. Every face looked different from the last, and not one of them seemed to notice the difference.

She had heard of how Humanity played a role in stopping the Reapers and the Covenant. More than a role, they were the leaders in that fight. Even their enemies were forced to rally behind the banner of Earth. For some reason, her mother never wished to talk about the war, never wanted to discuss anything having to do with it. Benese

never pressed her on this, she always assumed there had been something precious to her mother lost when the fighting happened. Something that Benese still wanted to know about.

Mysterious would have to be saved for later, now the only thing that occupied her thoughts was of her dear sick uncle.

Gripping her mother's hand, which easily dwarfed her own, Benese looked up to the seemingly all knowing figure before her. Liara was adorned in a simple outfit, white skintight pants and a purple shirt that hugged her tightly. What had caught Benese's eye, however, was the simple golden ring worn on Liara's left hand. That seemingly simple piece of metal, had become the biggest inquiry of Benese's young life. For herself, Liara had dressed Benese into a small green dress with slick black dress shoes and stockings, all had been supplied by Joker for a birthday long ago.

The two stood on a small train, which was travelling from the center of a large city, to a military Hospital near the city's edge. The journey didn't take more than a few fleeting minutes, but it was enough for Benese to view a great deal of the city. If each Human was a unique creature all their own, then their architecture reflected it. For every building she saw, two more appeared more fascinating than the last.

Taking a step back from her amusement, Benese thought about her mother's love for Earth once more. Still facing the window, she asked, "Mother, was my father from Earth?" Looking from the corner of her eye, Benese was only able to see a small flinch in Liara's other wise stone cold face. She never received an answer, but that had been enough for her to know.

Skidding to a halt, the train stopped at a platform that appeared to be floating in the sky. Once the door had slid open and the pair stepped off, Benese realized that it was just a large open stop, supported by pillars on the ground. Turning to her right, Liara pushed through the small crowd on the station, filled with Humans trying to board and disembark. All of them seemed to be in some kind of a hurry.

Focusing on her target, Liara rushed to the end of the platform. She gripped Benese's hand tightly as she walked, unwilling to lose her in the crowd. At the end of the platform, was a medium sized walkway, still suspended into the air by concrete pillars down below. Where the walkway ended, the entrance of the Hospital could be seen.

It didn't take long for Liara to quickly step down the path, dodging people as she went, child still in hand. Once the sliding doors opened, the Asari were immediately rushed with a gust of cool air conditioned air.

Noticing the front desk ahead of her, Liara walked up to it and waited patiently for the nurse behind it to finish her call. Once through, she looked up at her, grinning with an unusually large smile. Something about the nurse, seemed to scare Benese, who cowered behind her mother's legs.

"And what can I do for you, dearies?" the nurse asked, eyes wide open, waiting for a response.

"I need the room number for Jeff Moreau. We're family friends, hoping to visit."

"Oh, you're here to see ol' Joker. He's right down that hall." The nurse leaned over the desk and used her pen to point down the hall on the left. "Third door on your left, sweetie. Oh and quick reminder, we don't allow any droids or pets while you're here."

With that, Liara nodded her thanks, and headed straight for the room.

What ever the pair had expected to see, seemed so much better than what was there before them. The center of the room housed Joker, who was bedridden and weak, hooked up to machines with multiple functions. He didn't seem to notice the two enter the room, that was until Benese ran up to hug him.

"Uncle Joker!" she screamed, jumping on top of him in the bed without care.

"Ow! Hey kiddo!" Despite his pain, Joker still wrapped his arms around her to embrace the hug he received.

"Benese!" Liara screamed, "Get off of him."

"Oh don't worry about it, Liara. The docs have me so drugged up, I'm lucky I felt a thing. But she probably broke a rib or two." This created a giggle from Benese, who moved over on the bed to sit by his side. His face seemed to brighten at their presence, and his entire demeanor changed to something more akin to his former self. "Thanks for coming."

Crossing her arms, Liara looked at him puzzled. "Surely we can't be the first to arrive?"

"Don't call me Shirley," Joker grumbled, before pulling himself up to look at her. "Garrus has been here for a while. Had to go down the hall to use the head. Old man bladder I guess. Ashley called, but is too busy trying to run the Navy, she said not to die before her next vacation. Adams and Cortez sent some flowers, very touching really. I think Thane's son actually sent me a card, didn't have anything it other than a small alien prayer, but it's the thought that counts. Oh and Wrex stopped by to say hi, he just stepped out to find something to eat."

"Wrex is here?"

"Yeah I was surprised, the old son of a bitch actually took time off to see me." He looked towards Benese, who had giggled at his curse. Pushing his finger up to his lips, he gave her the signal for "shh," before continuing. "I'm not sure about Tali or any of the others. Not everyone was able to keep in touch ya know."

Benese recognized most of the names Joker shared, they were all people she had met at one point in her life or another. Though some were more familiar than others.

"Did somebody say my name?" The voice came from a deep and powerful source, one that could only be a Krogan. Turning around, Liara noticed Wrex standing in the door way. He looked out of sorts,

wearing regular Krogan attire, rather than his normal full battle armor.

"Wrex, it's good to see you," Liara said, wrapping the Krogan in a friendly hug.

"It's been far too long Liara. I'm getting the feeling you don't want to visit Tuchanka any more."

"Well the last time I did, we were almost eating by a giant Thresher Maw." Benese's imagination ran wild with this, the idea of her mother actually on the Krogan homeworld was surprising. Hearing about the Thresher Maw, seemed to only heighten the ordeal.

Finally noticing the littlest member of the room, Wrex moved past Liara and up to Joker's bedside. "And who's this? Is this the little pip squeak I met before? No, couldn't be. I remember her being a bit less scared of me," Wrex teased.

Benese had hidden herself in Joker's arm, only peeping an eye out to gape at the massive alien before her. Prodding her to come out, Joker leaned in and said, "Oh come on now, Wrex's smell is a lot worse than his bite."

This brought her out a bit more, smiling as she showed more of her face to the world. Taking his chances, Wrex pulled the girl out and threw her into the air, which she loved every minute of.

A metallic voice interrupted the shrieks of pleasure. "I can see that everyone is getting along fine in here then. For a second there I thought those screams was some psychiatric patient down the hall. Liara, it's good to see you," Garrus said, coming up beside the Asari.

"Garrus, how is it running the Hierarchy?"

Giving her a wink, he said, "Like you don't know. A lot of stress trying to deal with the remaining Covenant species, among other things." He chuckled. "I can imagine it's a lot easier than dealing with her."

By now, Benese was on the ground again, looking up at the much taller adults in the room. "Uncle Garrus," she said, "What is that supposed to mean?"

Grinning, Garrus squatted down to be on eye level with her, "I forget that you are your mother's child. You're too smart for your age, might get you into trouble one day. Now how bout you go play with Wrex in the hall, your mother and I need to talk."

Growing a worried look on her face, Benese opened her mouth to protest. She didn't want to be shoved out of the room like a child, anything her mother had to do she could handle as well. However, Wrex had other plans.

"Come on pip squeak," he said, throwing the girl onto his massive hump to hold onto. "We've got lots of explosions to cause. Haha!"

The two rushed out of the room together, Benese too caught up in the

rush to think about anything otherwise.

Now that the three were alone, Garrus spoke first, "She really does look like him. I know they're not supposed to, but she's got some of that Shepard charm in her."

Liara smiled. "I don't want to talk about it. Now come on Garrus, what's going on."

* * *

><p>A few hours later

By the time Benese and Wrex returned, Joker had fallen asleep and Garrus and Liara were deep in discussion on the couch on the far side of the room. Noticing the duo enter, Liara stood up, rubbing out the creases in her shirt as she did so.

"Say your goodbyes, Benese. We'll be back later tomorrow." Liara strained to say the words, something had obviously shaken her.

Benese could see the wiriness in her eyes, feel the pain in her voice. It was subtle, but something she had been able to detect of the many years bonding with her mother. She wouldn't pester her about it now, only abiding by her wishes and bidding her goodbyes. She gave Wrex a particularly long hug, before moving onto Garrus, you gave her an odd feeling kiss on the head. When she moved on to give Joker a kiss as he slept, she noticed something strange. Despite his obvious snoring, Joker didn't appear to be slumbering peacefully. Instead, he appeared to be fully awake, trying desperately to fool the others around him. Looking to him in curiosity, Benese was about to push it into another one of her uncle's many quirks, before she noticed one of his eyes opened. Very carefully, and very quietly, he pulled out a box from under his pillow, and handed it to her. It was a cute little black box, with a note on it that simply read, "For Benese. Do not open until the time is right." Looking back to Joker, she watched as he put his finger to his lips, giving her the signal to be silent.

On their way back to the train, Liara seemed extraordinarily more distant than before. Nothing before had shaken her this badly, and Benese was more determined now to uncover the secrets her mother had been hiding.

* * *

><p>AN: It occurred to me, halfway through writing this, that I had accidentally made a major choice in the ME3 campaign for this story.

I was supposed to wait to see if the readers of _The Cycle _wanted to cure the Genophage or not, before including Wrex into this story. Unfortunately, that little detail completely slipped my mind. Oh well, sorry folks but I doubt you guys really wanted to kill off Wrex. And if you did, you're probably a heartless bugger!

Great way to end a chapter there Church. Well, this will be expanded upon at a much later date. I just wanted to get the idea on paper. As always, thank you for reading, and please feel review to review and

do the many other awesome things I'd love for you to do =).

2. Prologue II

****Prologue II****

****Thessia****

Since she had been of age, Benese despised going to school. If it hadn't been for her mother's incessant nagging, she would gladly have skipped away, using her time for more important matters. It wasn't that her classes weren't challenging, far from it, it was the fact that Benese was never able to engage in the true studying she desired. Nothing there seemed to appeal to her, the teachers were dull and dimwitted, the other Asari students only mocked and teased her. The only satisfaction she found throughout the day, was watching the sun set as she awaited her mother's arrival to reclaim her daughter.

Her attitude remained unchanged throughout most of her education. She always held her mother in the position of her main teacher, always willing to indulge her more science and history questions. Benese was never bothered by her lack of social friends, believing the other girls in school were too attached to bizarre ridiculous notions such as romance or adventure. This was, until, she met the Elcor.

There was a specific group of girls, three of them to be precise, who always seemed to stir up what ever trouble they saw fit. Benese attributed this to their lack of intellect, forcing them to resort to more barbaric means of communication. They would often taunt her, mock her from afar, as they did with almost anyone. However, they had a peculiar fear of Benese, which kept their idle mocking to a rather minimum. Their fear of her, did not stop them from trying.

Though it was rare, there were, on occasion, aliens who frequented the school. Children who, for one reason or another, would come to learn and study. Since Asari matured rather slowly, in comparison to other species children, most would only remain in the same grade for a rather short period of time. Of course, the group of three would always love to point out the alien children's differences, mocking them for nothing more than their own genetic code.

It was on a particularly uneventful day, in which Benese's attention was entirely absorbed by a rather fascinating chemistry book, that her focus was directed up from the book. With the school day over, the kids all gathered around their respective friends and social groups, chattering away about the day's events. The group of three would always sit alone, snickering among themselves about the jokes they made about others. Benese sat by herself, as she so often did, reading her leather bound book, an oddity for her generation.

Something blocked her light though, and she was surprised to look up and find an Elcor standing before her. He was large, but obviously not full grown, barely half the height of an adult of his species.

'Another transfer alien,' she thought to herself. 'Should be interesting, most of these girls have never seen an Elcor before.'

She was about to speak up, only to ask the alien to refrain himself from blocking her sun, when he moved himself away, shrinking back way from the crowd as best he could. It was all for naught, for he had already been noticed by every other Asari girl present. The gossip now changed topic to him, every girl wondering why an Elcor would be among their ranks. Unfortunately, this Elcor attracted the attention of three rather unpleasant individuals.

The triad stood up from their bench at the far end of the crowd, eager to have every focus on the scene they would create. They walked with a particular swagger, something they contributed to their own signature of crudeness.

"Hey," the lead girl shouted, as all three surrounded the Elcor against a wall. "What's a big ugly Rachnar like you doing here?" The other two laughed, believing the insult to be the funniest thing their limited minds could conjure.

The Elcor seemed to stutter, flustered by the sudden insult. "Peacefully: I'm only here to finish my primary studies. I don't wish for any trouble." Though the Elcor were known for their lack of emotion, this one just reeked of it. Apparently, he was young enough to still contain the hormonal changes that came with adolescent teens.

"That didn't answer her question," the second girl spoke. "Thessia is for Asari only. My mommy says so, and you are most obviously not Asari."

"With a slight pang of fear: My father is a diplomat, he thought moving here..."

The trio didn't care what his response was going to be, they had already developed their scheme long before he spoke. Without provocation, the three girls used their strength and weak biotics to knock the Elcor on his side, laughing as the alien fell to the ground hard. His bag, which had been on his back previously, broke on the impact, sending papers and tablets flying across the concrete. By now, the confrontation attracted the view of the other girls, most of whom giggled at the loud thud made by the impact between creature and ground.

By now, Benese had seen enough. Throwing her book aside, she pulled herself up, and marched over to the still laughing girls. The Elcor still remained on the ground, trying to turn his face away from the laughing crowd. It almost looked as if he were blushing.

"Hey! Pick on someone your own size!" she shouted, launching a weak biotic warp at the lead girl. It smacked against the back of her head, causing her to fall to the ground, landing on her own face. This brought about startled gasp from the crowd, all surprised Benese had bothered to do anything at all, let alone knock the girl to the ground. She hadn't meant to, she completely underestimated the power her warp would have on the girl.

The other two helped her up, and all three turned to glare at Benese. They towered over her by a good three inches, easily intimidating the otherwise reclusive girl.

"Well now Benese, if you like the alien so much, you can go down to

the ground with him!" the lead girl shouted, as her two side-kicks grabbed Benese by the arms. They threw her to the ground, where she skid across the way to lie next to the Elcor. The entire confrontation only brought about more shrieks of laughter from the crowd. "Take care of your new pet now, Benese," the triad mocked, walking away to an awaiting bus.

"With much gratitude: Thanks for trying," the Elcor stuttered, struggling to stand on its legs once more. Once she was back on her feet, Benese bent down to help lift the alien up, struggling under the weight of his leg.

"Just don't mention it," Benese responded, wiping away some blood and dirt from her face. She wasn't looking forward to explaining this one to her mother. Turning around, she started to walk away, hoping to forget the day's events ever happened. She was surprised when the Elcor tried desperately to keep up.

"In a friendly manner: My name is Wheatlen. In case you were wondering."

"I wasn't," Benese blurted, bending over to pick her book back up.

"With intimate curiosity: I happen to love that series, I've the entire collection of sciences from that author. Apparently, he was some kind of xeno-biologist during the Reaper war."

"Fascinating," Benese said sarcastically. Though she was trying to repel Wheatlen, she made sure to take special note of his knowledge in books.

"You don't seem like the kind of person to help out like that. Why did you?" Wheatlen asked, forgetting to include his species trademark emotional quote.

Benese sighed, knowing that no matter what, the Elcor would now remain her responsibility.

"I don't know. It's just wrong for those girls to treat others like that."

"With complete sincerity: Well thank you very much, um. What was your name again?"

"Benese," she said with a smile.

"Thank you, Benese. I hope to one day repay the favor."

* * *

><p>She spent the rest of that day with Wheatlen, discussing everything from the weather to new advancements in space flight. Though she hated to admit it, it felt wonderful to Benese to talk to someone her intellectual equal. The only time she would ever talk to someone this long, was when her mother felt particularly chatty.<p>

"So what is your age?" Wheatlen asked. He had given up stating his current emotion with words a long time ago, much to the delight of

Benese. She found it fascinating to try and guess the Elcor's feelings, without him blatantly stating it.

"I'm 60 now," she answered.

"Asari life spans have always boggled me."

Turning to him, Benese asked, "Why, how long does it take for your species to mature?"

"Slower than most, but much quicker than yours. I'm only 21, but I'm just considered an adolescent."

Benese shrugged, she wasn't completely familiar with Elcor biology, it hadn't been something she took any real interest in. However, she did love to learn, and nothing was a better well of knowledge, than directly from its source.

"So why exactly are you on Thessia?" she asked, changing the subject away from biology for the moment.

Wheatlen sighed, or whatever the Elcor equivalent was, before responding. "My father is one of the Courts' ambassadors. He decided moving to the Asari homeworld, would allow him to better negotiate for their aid."

"Where did you live before?" she questioned, her curiosity peaked.

"On Ekuna. It was mainly mother and I, father would always be off world for work. But, that was fine by us, gave me and my mother more time together."

Despite his impressive stature, Wheatlen's voice was rather high pitched for an Elcor. However, as he spoke of his mother, his tone grew more somber and serious, as if he were repeating a story he wished wouldn't continue. Again, this was all very odd for Benese, who had the impression that all Elcor emotions were only detectable through words.

"What changed?"

"Mother died."

The bluntness in his answer surprised Benese, she was caught completely off guard.

"You should consider yourself lucky, I never knew my father at all," Benese uttered, not knowing what the appropriate response for this type of situation.

"Puzzled: Do you know if your father was Asari?"

Benese shrugged, "All I know is that he was Human, but he probably died a long time ago." She chuckled, "Human years are like Kowakian years."

"Kowakian, what are those?"

"Vermin mostly, but some people keep them as pets. They don't live a

long time, so they're used to teach children the meaning of cherishing something while it last."

Wheatlen looked over to her, "Are your lifespans that horrible?"

"Yes," her response came out solid and cold, she didn't wish to be reminded of the family she had already lost. Shaking her head, she continued, "You don't know much about Thessia, do you?"

Wheatlen shook his head no.

"I can teach you, show you how everything works," Benese thought for a moment before continuing, "if you want me to."

Looking away, Wheatlen pondered over her offer, starrng at the sun as he did so. "Cautiously: So we'll be friends then?"

Grinning, Benese answered "Friends."

"Happily: Then maybe I could give you a ride home? My father expects me to walk, I don't mind taking you with."

With an eyebrow arched, Benese looked to him, "You want me to ride on your back then?"

"Precisely," Wheatlen said, turning his body around to face the opposite direction of Benese. "Just climb on."

Hesitantly, Benese gripped onto the sides of Wheatlen's sack, using it to pull herself onto his back. She struggled to for a moment, but was finally able to straddle the Elcor like a mount.

"Ready," she said, leaning over to whisper into Wheatlen's ear.

Without another word, Wheatlen started walking away from the now vacant school, leaving the troubles of the day with it. Now, as the duo traveled down the pathway, everything seemed to be just a little bit brighter. Looking up to the blue sunset overhead, Benese couldn't help but smile.

'I've never noticed it, but,' she thought to herself, 'the sunsets look so much prettier from down here.'

* * *

><p>Benese had arrived home long before her mother, something that rarely ever happened. Normally, she would wait at the school for her mother's arrival, which would always be at dusk. Then, the two would go out to find something to eat, chatting with each other as they did so. It became a kind of ritual between the two, one that Benese quite enjoyed.<p>

On the rare chance her mother did not arrive to pick her up from class, Benese would take it upon herself to journey home, where she would prepare both her meal, and something for her mother when ever she did return. Almost always, Benese would be asleep long before Liara ever arrived. By the next morning, her mother would simply go about like any other day, though it always seemed like something

bothered her, a feeling Benese could never nag away.

She had just finished preparing her meal, when the house VI spoke up, alerting everyone listening that her mother had returned.

"Hello mother, I'm in the kitchen," Benese shouted.

Liara came walking in a moment later, attention narrowed on only her omni-tool. Words slipped up the screen, carrying information that Benese couldn't make out.

"No it couldn't be," Liara muttered to herself. She seemed completely unaware of Benese's presence, totally engrossed by the device. "After all this time?"

Stepping away from the oven, Benese walked over to her mother, who was looking back and forth from her omni-tool to a datapad on the table.

"Mother," she whispered, unsure of how deep in trance Liara might be. "What's going on? Is something wrong?"

Suddenly, Liara's trance was broken. "What, who?" She looked down to her right, finally taking notice of her daughter. "Oh Benese," she blundered, "I thought you were still at school, I was about to leave." Her eyes immediately went back to the omni-tool.

"It's fine mother, a friend walked me home today."

The mentioning of a friend was able to momentarily return Liara to reality once more. Giving off a sigh, she turned off the omni-tool, and pulled out a chair from under the table. Sitting down, she was now eye level with her daughter. "So you've finally made a friend? How did this come about."

And Benese recounted the tale of her day, making sure to include every detail she could recall about Wheatlen. Liara simply sat and listened, filled with glee her daughter was emerging from the shell she had put herself into.

"An Elcor? I'm amazed they're even on Thessia, let alone that you were able to make friends with one." Pulling her daughter in close, Liara squeezed her tight, resting her chin on the top of Benese's head. "I'm so proud of you dear."

"What for?" Benese asked, "Standing up to the bullies, or making a friend?"

"A little bit of bother," Liara chuckled, kissing Benese on the head before she stepped away. "I hope to one day meet him. But for now, let's eat then head to bed."

Nodding in agreement, Benese ran back to the stove, her bare feet smacking against the tile floor, to retrieve the pan of fried fruit she had made. It wasn't long before both girls had their fair share of food, and immediately started cleaning the dishes. After that, Liara rushed her to bathe away the grime gathered from the day, before urging her to bed. She made sure to tuck her in, and give a kiss on the forehead, before turning to leave Benese's bedroom.

Liara stopped just short of closing the door, and turned back to look at her daughter. Only a small beam of light hit her, coming in from the hallway through a crack in the door, but it was just enough for Liara to have a clear view.

"Oh Shepard," she whispered to herself, "I wish there was a way you could have seen her."

And with that, Liara closed the door completely, leaving Benese in darkness. After a few minutes, her eyes adjusted, and she could clearly see her room illuminated by the moon and stars above, cascading dim light through her thin curtains. Reaching under her bed, Benese searched around for the familiar feeling of her box, the one given to her by Joker so long ago.

Wrapping her fingers around it, Benese pulled the package into the light, observing it carefully as she so often did. She was never able to ask her uncle what the box was for, he died before she had the chance, due to growing complications with Vrolik syndrome. So yet again, she was left with another puzzle to solve, and no real way to find the solution. The note, which had been written on yellow paper by Joker, had long since faded and been discarded. She was careful not to alert her mother to the box, something about it and the way her uncle had given it to her, suggested it might be best to remain a mystery.

Now she only had to figure out how to open the infernal thing. It wasn't like an ordinary box, this one had no openings or seals. If anything, it was more of a solid piece of metal, rather than an actual box. But she knew the object was hollow, and her rattling of it told her something was inside. Yet she could never find out what. Shrugging, she moved to put it back under her bed, when something grabbed her attention.

The moonlight, which had just reemerged from behind a cloud, cascaded upon the box, highlighting some sort of marking embedded in the side. It was small, something that would never be noticed in the otherwise cracked surface, and nearly impossible to make out. Struggling, Benese looked at the marking, desperate to determine what it was.

"It looks like some kind of alien tongue," she grunted to herself. She gave out a long frustrated sigh, before throwing out her arms and tossing the box across her room. "I'm not going to figure it out now. Maybe Wheatlen can help," she whispered, right as she turned to her side, and pulled up the blankets for sleep.

* * *

><p>AN: To celebrate my completion of the first section of The Cycle, I decided to finish up the second half of the prologue. Really looking forward to where this story will go, and I'm going to enjoy the freedom I have with it! I know most of you are probably wondering why this is in a xover section, seeing as there's almost no Halo aspects. And well, there probably won't be until I'm done with The Cycle. However, if you leave reviews and ask very nicely, I will be more than happy to share with you, through PM, where I want this story to go, and how it will fit into the cannon set up by The Cycle

As always, thanks for reading. And please share your thoughts with me
=)

3. No Fortunate Son

****Ch 1****

****No Fortunate Son****

Orbiting far above the atmosphere of the gas giant Thail, a small station sat in the cold recesses of space. It fell silently into the shadow of the planet, protected from the light given off by the Tasale system's lone star, almost skidding across the bottom of the planet's eccentric rings. The unnatural satellite could go completely unnoticed, staying peacefully in its cycle around the Thail, forever away from the reaches of the Asari colony of Illium, the sole planet of any worth within the system. And it came with a kind of silence that could only attract the most introverted of individuals, which is exactly why Benese found her temporary home so appealing.

She sat in a chair, her feet set up against the terminal in front of her as a song blared through speakers overhead. Sitting there, half asleep as she fumbled through a game on her omni-tool, Benese couldn't help but feel content with her small little place in the Universe. It has been fifteen years since she had left her home on Thessia to further her studies at Illium University, a decision her mother couldn't help but protest.

* * *

><p>"And you're sure you want to do this?" she asked on the day of Benese's departure. It had been their last meal together, the pair sitting around the table as Liara shifted nervously in her chair. "Wouldn't you rather stay here for another decade or two, what's wrong with the universities here?"<p>

"I'm sure, the university has been very accommodating. And they have the best deep space facility in the Republics," Benese answered her, practically bouncing as her voice filled with glee at the prospect of the coming adventure.

"But it's Illium," Liara protested, her eyes fluttering from her plate to her daughter, still full of concern despite her growing age.

"I'll be fine, mother," Benese said mused, laughing over her mother's almost overprotective concern. "It's not like I'm running away and joining a merc gang, it's a scholarship opportunity."

Sighing in defeat, Liara pushed herself away from the table, her appetite lost long ago as she slowly came to terms with her daughter's decision. "I just worry about you is all. Promise me you'll write," she said, wiping away a tear that had managed to fall to her cheek.

"Of course I will," Benese responded, standing up and walking around the table to pull her mother into a tight embrace. Still sitting in the chair, Liara accepted the hug whole heartily, nuzzling her cheek

against Benese's stomach as she wrapped her arms around her bare legs.

"Okay mom," Benese started, rubbing her mother's shoulder in a vain attempt to comfort her. Compassion had never been one of her greater strengths. She had always been more inclined to remain separate from others, finding what little interaction she had with her mother and Wheatlen to be tiring enough. Struggling to push herself away, Liara wiped her eyes again, fighting back the urge to hug Benese and never let go.

"Have you told Wheatlen yet?" she said, standing up from the table and taking her plates to the counter.

"Not yet, hopefully he won't try to hug me. Might fall over and crush me before I even get off the planet."

Liara chuckled at this, the tiny morsel of humor doing much to soothe her saddened mind. "You better get going then, Goddess knows you've procrastinated enough already."

* * *

><p>An obnoxious alarm snapped Benese out of her memory, bringing her back into reality. The song had stopped playing through the speakers, being replaced by a continuous low buzz as a small red light flashed. Sitting up straight, Benese dropped her feet to the ground and scanned over the console to deactivate the alarm. In a moment, the blaring noise was gone, replaced again by a soothing tone and melody.<p>

_"Give me the beat boys, and free my soul. I wanna get a lost in your rock in roll and drift away," _it went, providing the only source of noise on the empty station.

"And now we're outside of Illium's communication range, fantastic," Benese grumbled aloud to herself. No one else was on the station to hear her, meaning she would be the only one to listen, at least her and the dozens of cameras watching over the observatory she was now in. Everyone else had left the past week, returning to the University for a shift change and to bring back fresh supplies. In the meantime, the station was put into a kind of stasis, providing only enough power for its computers and life support to run. Benese had volunteered to remain behind, as she so often did, and watch over the place in case of any unforeseen problems. To which her fellow students were only so happy as to oblige her.

Which is how she found herself alone now, spending her days reading after running through the the station's diagnostic checkup for the day. It was a relaxing sort of pattern, each day carrying on the same as the last in an almost habit forming routine for Benese. Only having to check on the data brought in through the observation instruments, once the station's VI had shifted through all the static.

"Computer," she said aloud, waiting for the VI to sound a small tune when her call to it had been recognized. "Shut down all secondary systems, and lock it up for the night." The machine responded with another chime, as the console's holographic panels deactivated and the lighting faded. Even the music stopped, ending the song short of

its finale. Standing up, Benese walked towards the back of the room, her path illuminated by orange hazard lights on the floor. Not that she truly needed them, by now she had managed to memorize her path back to her room easily, a simple turn here and there, followed by climbing the stairs at the end of the hall.

She managed to find her room with ease, waiting patiently as the door slid open to reveal the brightly lit interior. Despite her normally neat and orderly manner, time had found a way to create a mess in the little hole she now called home. Her desk was cluttered with papers, a data pad or two glowing from underneath the stack. Writing by hand had always been easier to her than typing something out on a keyboard, unfortunately she had a habit of keeping almost every piece of note she took. The bed was in even worse shape, with bits and pieces of clothing stacked by the baseboard, threatening to fall down unless something was done soon.

Reaching to her waist, Benese pulled her shirt over her head, sliding it off her tendrils with ease, exposing her bare chest to the cold air inside the station. Throwing it onto the pile, the shirt was quickly followed by her suit pants, as Benese walked through the bathroom door directly next to the one she entered. Calling it a bathroom would have been generous, as the closet sized room served as little more than a toilet facing a shower, with a sink sticking out of the far side of the shower. The entire room was barely an arms length across, providing only enough room for a single person to occupy at one time.

The water turned on with a touch, immediately adjusting itself to a comfortably warm temperature as Benese tested it with her toe. Satisfied with the results, she gladly stepped under the shower head, closing her eyes as the soothing warmth massaged her skin. She took a moment to enjoy herself, the warm water doing wonders for her worn and tired self. Another perk of her classmates being on world was that there was now plenty of warm water to be had, something the station lacked when the others would hog it, skipping some of their duties early just to be the first to have a warm shower. But now, Benese had it all to herself, a fact she relished in.

Another blaring alarm interrupted her moment of zen, causing her mood to sour. Turning off the shower, Benese waited for a moment as the warm water rushing down her body ceased, replaced with a cold sensation as the few remaining drops clung to her blue skin. A second later, and a burst of air left her relatively dry, expect for a small trickle of water she could feel falling down her head tendrils and onto her shoulder blades.

"Computer," she shouted, "what's the error?"

"Unknown," the machine said, coming through the speaker in her room.

"For the love of..." she cursed, rushing from the bathroom back into her cabin. Grabbing a white pair of pants she slipped them on, the cloth removing any possible water left on her legs. "Computer, what's happening?"

"Unknown," _it said again, only furthering Benese's frustration.

"What do you mean 'unknown'? Is there something wrong with the telescopes or any of the other equipment?" she asked, looking at the roof as if to glare directly at the VI itself.

_"Negative," _it responded.

Throwing her arms up, Benese shook her head in frustration, before slapping her hands against her thighs. "Is there an incoming meteor shower? An issue with life support?"

_"Negative. Negative," _it answered again, with a noticeable delay in between. _"Warning, unknown error."_

"Well I can see that," Benese grumbled, waving her omni-tool to signal the alarm to silence. She had expected nothing else to follow, for the warning sirens to cease and be followed only by the gentle hum of the station's mass effect field, but something else came through the silence, seeming almost deafening by comparison.

A huddled bunch of footsteps could be heard, echoing up from some deck below Benese's cabin, pounding away through the metal in the walls and floor. No one was due back on the station for another week, and there wasn't a possibility they would just walk aboard unannounced. They seemed to be growing louder, coming closer to Benese's room with every step. She could feel a small lump grow in her throat as Benese hurried over to her desk to pull open a drawer and grab a pistol from inside, something her mother had insisted she bring with her for some unknown reason.

Fear threatened to consume her, as Benese struggled to find a steady grip on the weapon, her fingers still damp from the shower's water. Every bone in her body was shaking, the deafening footsteps only quickened in pace. Turning around to face the door, Benese could almost feel her heart jump into her throat as a shadow approached the doorway.

"Well what do we have here?" it asked, stepping closer into light, revealing a massive creature in its place. The creature looked down right terrifying, towering over Benese by a good four feet, with an ugly half shaven head covered in small bristles of dark brown fur. It was ape like, massive arms gripping two bladed weapons that seemed to be used as more of an intimidation factor than anything else, while its twisted face carried a snout like mouth with a massive under bite, giving the alien an even fiercer presence. It stood almost naked, with the exception of fur covering its entire body, save for a red piece of armor strapped to its chest sporting the gruesome symbol of the Blood Pack.

"Jir...Jiralhanae," Benese said, stuttering as fear caused her throat to constrict.

"Observant of ya," he said, slipping his weapons into holds on his belt. Another voice came from behind him, turning his attention away from Benese for a moment, who was still frozen in fear. "Got an Asari in here," he roared, his voice carrying with it a deep tone that seemed to shake the very ground he walked on. "Pretty little thing, she be a good price."

"Just hurry up," the voice said, carrying with it a sign of frustration. Its owner obviously disappointed they had not found

Benese before him.

"Now come here," the alien before her said, taking a careful step closer to her. "I ain't gonna hurt ya too much., if you don't give me a reason to." As he spoke, he gave her a wicked grin, revealing twisted teeth and horrid breathe that almost caused Benese to vomit. She could almost see bugs running across his skin, hidden from full view by the padded and dirty fur.

Before she was able to react, the brute was on top of her, grabbing her arm with one hand and her neck with the other. Benese groaned in pain, struggling as massive hands tightened around her. "Good girl, just hold still," he said, obviously enjoying himself far too much. It was at that point Benese wished she had been able to finish dressing, as the beast drooled over her naked skin. Dazzled by the bright blue, the Jiralhanae was left completely unaware of the pistol still in Benese's free hand, instead feeling completely in charge over the comparatively small alien in his grip.

Benese's fear was quickly being replaced with disgust and anger, as she shuddered at the hairy hand around her neck. Her temporary moment of paralysis was gone, even as the prospect of a coming death seemed to be ever approaching. Using her free hand, Benese pushed the pistol against the foreboding brute, brushing against his body's mangled hair. He was so preoccupied with his prize, he failed to notice anything, until he heard a loud ringing sound, followed by a sudden pain in his chest. Unable to register what had happened, the Jiralhanae released Benese from her grip, falling down on top of her bed, which gave off an audible thud in protest.

Hearing the footsteps again, Benese shot out her door towards the empty stairwell beyond, bullets ricocheting across the metal wall.

"She has gun!" a Vorchha yelled, halting the others from proceeding upwards. Tripping over the now dead alien, Benese ducked against her wall, prepared to use it as cover should the rest of the mercenaries decide to charge her. Sliding down to the ground, she buried her head in her hands and knees, unaware of the red blood as it was brushed from her hands to her scalp. She could hear the aliens fighting among themselves, as they debated which would be the one to lead the way up, all of them unwilling to be gun downed.

"Goddess, help me," Benese cried, her voice quacking as her eyes started to water. She had never take a life before, let alone been caught in the middle of a band of mercenaries putting her life in danger. She wished she had never left Thessia, that she had stayed with her mother at home, safely nestled in her arms like she had been for so many years.

"Look out!" The same Vorchha shouted again, followed shortly there after by a loud explosion that caused the floor to vibrate. There were sounds of gunfire, as groups of aliens screamed in defiant roars, before being silenced by another deafening explosion. It wasn't long before all motion and noise ceased, and Benese sat her self up right to stare out the door.

She could see as a shadow fell down the stares, lifeless and flopping like a doll. Yet another one approached, unwavering as it took its time coming up the steps. Readyng herself, Benese aimed the pistol

towards the railing, waiting for whatever it was to come into view. She struggled to ease her breathing, desperate for the pounding in her chest to cease so that she might focus. A small piece of black armor appeared, immediately causing Benese to twitch and fire at it. Its wearer ducked down out of sight, causing her to loosen a sigh of relief.

"Don't come near me!" she shouted, hoping whatever it was that had started to come up would simply leave again.

"Can you please not shoot me?" it asked, shouting just to be heard clearly. "I did kind of save your life down here!"

"Who are you?" she asked, her aim wavering slightly, but still ready to snap back in case of any movement.

"Sork, Council Spectre. Now I'm going to put my rifle right here." A small hand appeared from below, bringing with it a dark blue weapon and putting it on the floor. "And I'm going to come up very slowly, please just don't shoot at me."

She watched hesitantly as another alien appeared from below, making sure to face her with his hands raised high in the air. He wore black armor, covering almost every part of his body except his joints and shins, where a more flexible cloth tightly wrapped around him. His armor was smooth in design, looking slick by military standards, covering even his massive two toed feet, and a rounded helmet with a large blue visor covering most of the top half. On the shoulder plates, where a blue glow shown out into the dark hallway, was the six pillar symbol adorned by all Spectres in a similar shape to wings. What stood before Benese now was a Sangheili Spectre.

"Are you alright?" he asked, stopping once he reached to top of the stairs. "They weren't able to hurt you at all, were they?" Sork still had his hands raised, doing his best to appear harmless, though even he could admit her fear was completely rationale. From his perspective, all he could see was a half naked Asari, huddled on the ground shaking with a pistol in hand, with a dead Jiralhanae behind her.

"No," she said coldly, still unwilling to lower her gun. "Why are you here?"

"Saving you of course," Sork replied, grinning slightly behind his helmet. "I'd get ready to move. There will be more coming."

"Not until you answer my question," Benese said, her voice cracking as she tried to stay calm. "Why are you here?"

"Last week, this station received a distress signal from an unknown source."

Looking away, Benese struggled to recall exactly what he was talking about. "We didn't receive anything. We're not even listening for distress signal's. This is a deep space research station. We're supposed to be watching stars!"

"It was buried in static, but you got it. Council got wind of it, sent me, and it looks like they weren't the only ones." He motioned towards the alien behind her. "Now grab what every you need, and

hurry. There's an Elcor drop ship waiting for us."

Standing up, Benese nodded in understanding, though still unsure of exactly what happened. Grabbing a sweater off of her desk, she slipped it on, cringing slightly as it pushed more alien blood against her skin. Finding a pair of white boots, she put them on, almost tripping over the alien still sprawled out across the room.

"That everything?" Sork asked, now standing in her door way, weapon back in his hands.

Benese shook her head in the affirmative, before stopping herself suddenly. "Wait, one second." Opening another drawer, Benese reached her hand in to pull out a small box, the same one she had carried with her since childhood. Pushing it into her pocket, she turned back towards Sork. "Sorry, ready."

Silently, he turned around, beckoning for her to follow. "Stay close behind me, I won't let anything happen to you," he whispered as they descended down the stairs, almost falling over the body of dead Krogan. "I need to make a stop in your archives, how do we get there?"

"Left hall," she said, pointing in that direction. Carefully, Sork started down the hallway, keeping an eye peeled in every direction for motion. Benese followed close behind him, almost completely shielded by the larger alien's body. "Door on your right."

The door slid open, as Sork quickly scanned the room for movement. Finding none, he was satisfied enough to move towards a terminal on the far side's wall. "Pull what you can," he ordered, facing back towards the door to cover her. "And make it fast."

Rushing over, Benese placed the pistol on the terminal, before her fingers danced across the interface punching in commands. "What am I looking for?" she asked, looking back towards Sork.

"Any information you have from the last three weeks, download it all to my omni-tool."

She went to work, finding every bit of data in the time frame from information on stars, to the crew's extranet history. Something she wished there was time to separate for.

"Got it," she shouted triumphantly. At least when she returned home, she wouldn't lose every bit of data left archived there. "Now what?" she asked, making sure to grab her pistol from its place.

"The Elcor fleet gave me a ride here, there's a shuttle waiting. You'll need a breather or something, have any aboard?"

"Follow me," Benese grumbled, pushing past him into the hallway. "How did the Elcor give you a lift here?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"They offered to help lead the mission. I'm not going to turn down free help on a mission."

"I thought you Sangheili were all about gaining honor through combat,

no matter the cost."

Shrugging, Sork continued following her close behind. "That's old fashioned thinking now a days. Used to be we wouldn't accept any kind of medical help either. There's some new age thinking among the younger generations, such as myself."

"I didn't even know your kind were eligible for the Spectres," Benese said, stepping through a door. In the room that followed were mask hanging from the wall, perfect size for an Asari space walk.

"A lots changed since the Reapers. Council can't be so simple minded. We haven't been barred for entry since well before I was born."

Grabbing one of the mask, Benese slipped it over her face so it covered her nose and mouth, forming an airtight seal against her cheeks. A small mass effect field pulsed through her from the mask, giving her a slight tickle as it created a thin atmosphere around her body and exposed parts so she would be able to survive the vacuum of space. "I'm not one to follow the Council's politics very much."

A booming roar caused them to go silent, as the duo both turned to notice a Krogan at the far end of the hall start to charge towards them in the room. It reached them before Sork was able to act, knocking the Sangheili clean off his feet and against the wall. Both Krogan and Snagheili were left dazed, jumbled against each other in a pile of limbs. Recovering first, the Krogan proceeded to smash his head against Sork, knocking him out cold. By now Benese had managed to find Sork's rifle on the ground next to her, having been knocked out of his hands during the Krogan's charge. Picking it up, she pointed it at the Krogan as it turned to face her.

"You're cute Asari," the Krogan mocked. "Put down the gun and I promise not to hurt you," he paused for a second, holding his words back like it was the final punch line of a joke, "much."

Gritting her teeth, Benese gripped the rifle closer to her chest. It was large for her, the butt pushing against her shoulders was almost an arms length, leaving just barely enough room for her to hang on to the grip, which proved to have ample room for her slender fingers, with one hand and the barrel with the other. It looked almost comical, like a small girl trying to carry her father's rifle, something that obviously didn't help her intimidate the Krogan.

"Screw you," she cursed, pulling the trigger as soon as the words escaped her mouth. Immediately, hot ionized plasma formed at the end of the barrel, launching at the Krogan who stood mere inches away. It was followed by another, and another, until a steady stream of matter struck against the Krogan's chest, quickly boiling away its shields and armor to reach the tender flesh underneath, which quickly sizzled against the rapid fire.

Benese didn't let go of the trigger until she was sure the alien finished its twitching and convulsing, even after the weapon stopped shooting and refused to continue. Luckily for her, by then the Krogan had been left charred, its face left as a barely recognizable piece of black bone. Hurrying over to Sork, Benese leaned over his still unconscious body, dropping the rifle as she did so.

"Hey wake up," she said, shaking his body as violently as she could manage. "Come on damn it, get up!"

Shaking his head, Sork reached up to grab her by the wrist, causing her to cease her shaking. "I'm up, he didn't hit me that hard." Leaning up straight, Sork took a moment to clear his head from the throbbing he could feel in his skull. It didn't hurt so bad now, but by tomorrow, the pain would easily triple. "Thanks for the assistance," he said, noticing the now dead Krogan for the first time.

"Goddess, I thought you were dead," Benese cried out, louder than she had intended.

Standing up straight, Benese helped Sork to his feet, only to have him fall almost on top of her. "Demon broke my leg," he spat, leaning against Benese for support. "Can you help me towards the air lock? Once we're outside, you need to grab onto me tightly." She nodded in understanding, before helping him climb over the body and through the door back into the hallway. The air lock was only in the next room, and Benese struggled under the weight of the Sangheili as she punched in the code to open the door.

"There," she said as the door opened in front of her, only to seal shut as soon as they had stepped through. "It'll take a minute to vent the atmosphere in here."

Putting his weight against the wall, Sork activated his omni-tool. "Dekuuna-3, do you read me?" He was treated to a greeting of static, before a quiet voice emerged through the background noise.

"Relieved: We are awaiting your signal. Was your mission successful?"

"Data's secured, and I found the only one stationed here."

_"Affirmative," _the voice said, fading away as Sork wrapped his arms around Benese.

"When you open the air lock, what ever happens, don't let go of me," he said, starring down at the Asari.

Nodding her head, Benese used her omni-tool to activate the air lock's control, resulting in the door slowly sliding open. What little air remained inside, was quickly jettisoned out into space, as the pair floated off of the floor, the artificial gravity having turned off upon the door's opening. Gripping Benese tight, Sork activated his thruster pack, pushing them slowly outside into the blackness. Benese wrapped her arms around his chest, holding on to her wrist on the far side tightly as the view of the station was replaced with the orange hue of Tasale, encompassing Benese's entire vision as the two drifted slowly to an object in the distance.

* * *

><p>AN: And done! Hope you guys like this. If you do, please send a review my way. If you don't, still send a review

telling me how terrible or atrocious you think this story is! I accept all kinds of criticism you can dish =P.

And for those who actually care about the lore at all, I'll be explaining in the next chapter through a codex entry at the end what happened to the galaxy after the events of The Cycle. I've gotten enough polls done to at least do that.

As always, thanks for reading!

End
file.